

# Is Pickleball the Perfect Pandemic Pastime?

Ellen DeGeneres recently declared herself among the intergenerational sport's ardent enthusiasts.

**By Rachel Simon**

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When social distancing mandates struck Daytona Beach, Fla., in April, residents of Latitude Margaritaville (one of several “55 and better” communities inspired by the Jimmy Buffett song) quickly gathered the essentials.

There were face masks and gloves and cans of food, yes, but also paddles. And balls. And chalk. Because while the coronavirus pandemic may have put normal life on hold, nothing was going to stop these people from playing pickleball.

Invented in 1965 by a Washington State congressman and two friends, pickleball — whose name comes from either the name of a cocker spaniel owned by one of the founders or the pickle boat used in crew, depending on who you ask — is a mash-up of tennis, badminton and Ping-Pong.

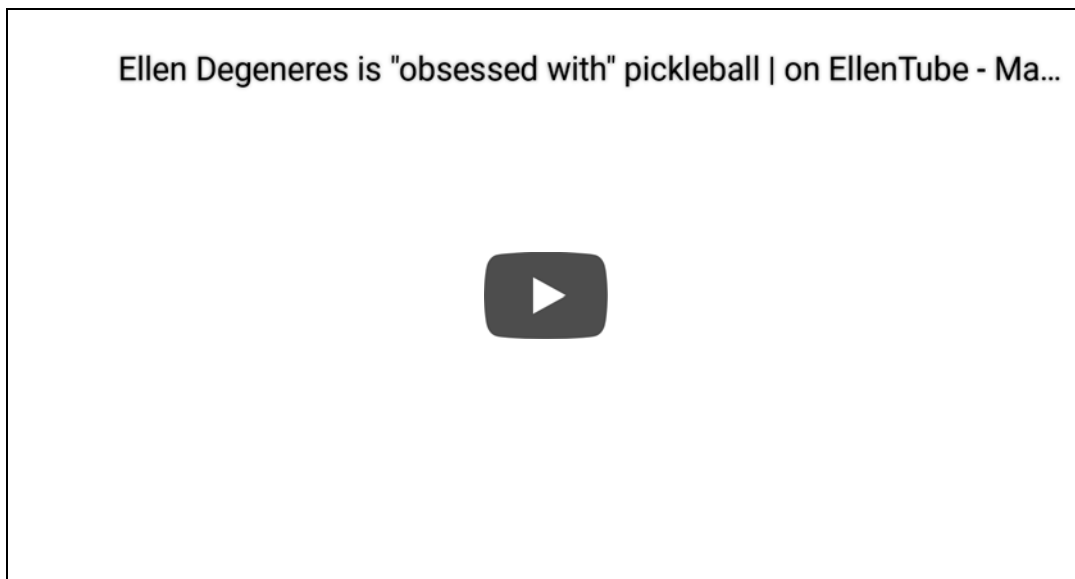
To play, two teams (typically two people each) send the ball back and forth on a small court, separated by a low net. The first side to score 11 points by a margin of at least two wins. Serves must be diagonal and underhand, the ball needs to bounce on each side before a volley and players can't hit when standing in a close-to-the-net area known as “the Kitchen” — but that's about all the persnickety detail.

Thus it has long been a staple of community center rec rooms and middle school gym classes.

In recent years, the pastime's popularity has soared. According to the 2019 Pickleball Participant Report by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association\, there are more than 3.3. million players in the United States, making it one of the country's fastest-growing sports.

And thanks to the pandemic, there may soon be many new “picklers,” as obsessives proudly call themselves. In driveways and rooftops across the country, players are setting up makeshift courts, using temporary paint or chalk to draw lines and making nets out of whatever items are available, and getting everyone in their households to join in on the fun.

The talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres recently said she was having a hard time walking because she was playing so much.



“As we’re going through this together and you’re trying to find things to do as a family or as a small group, it’s a perfect sport to take up,” said Tamara Baldanza Dekker, the chief marketing officer at Margaritaville, which has pickleball courts in each of its locations.

To parents desperate for new ways to entertain children (or themselves), pickleball can be a godsend. “It’s a multigenerational game, so you can play with your kids, and grandparents can play with their grandkids,” Ms. Dekker said. “It appeals to everybody.”

Annie Webb, 55, a transcript clerk in St. Davids, Pa., began playing pickleball last year and has been glad to have it as an option during isolation. “Finding another activity besides long walks with the dog while our tennis courts are closed has been really fun,” she said.



Staying out of 'The Kitchen': Stuart Schultz, the director of residential community relations at Latitude Margaritaville, plays with Mr. McLean. Charlotte Kesl for The New York Times



Mr. Schultz pops one over the net. Charlotte Kesl for The New York Times

And while running around a court for an hour can certainly be a good workout, pickleball, with its lightweight paddles and low net, requires little skill or training (though pros compete in U.S. Open-style tournaments each year).

“You really don’t have a great advantage hitting the ball harder than someone else. It’s much more of a game about placement and pace,” said Michael McLean, 62, a Latitude Margaritaville resident and self-described “pickleball aficionado.” “So that kind of equalizes it for a lot of folks.”

There are few rules about comportment, too. “It’s not like stuffy tennis,” Ms. Dekker said. “When you go to these tournaments, people are having a party! They’re interacting with not only each other, but the players. It’s serious, but serious fun.”

Laura Gainor, 37, a marketing consultant for the USA Pickleball Association (U.S.A.P.A.) who lives in Park Ridge, Ill., took up the sport only after she got her job, but found herself “extremely addicted immediately,” she said. She passed her skills along to her friends,

and “pretty soon, we had 40 people that started playing every Friday night.”

Because of the shutdown, gathering at a court for a few rounds of drinks and pickleball among pals isn’t a possibility right now. “Community’s kind of the key word with pickleball,” Ms. Gainor said. “We all just want to play so bad, but you just got to be patient.”

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Some regular players are finding workarounds in order to keep their friendly competitions alive, however. In Margaritaville, many residents passionate about both pickleball and social distancing are wearing gloves and masks during each match, touching paddles instead of shaking hands, and keeping contact with the ball at a minimum.

“Everybody is very sensitive to being smart, because we don’t want the courts to close down,” said Stuart Schultz, the director of residential community relations there (and Mr. McLean’s frequent pickleball partner).

It helps that there’s already a “non-volley zone” of seven feet from the net on each side of the court, so players on opposite teams can stay comfortably apart. “It’s almost the ultimate social-distancing game,” Mr. McLean said.

Of course, not even the most diligent actions can completely eliminate the chance of infection. “The ball’s like a petri dish, essentially, if you’re playing with big groups of people,” Ms. Gainor said. And with 64 percent of regular players 55 or older, according to the U.S.A.P.A., Covid-19 poses a serious risk to pickleball’s biggest fans — some of whom, Ms. Gainor worries, are ignoring government mandates by hosting crowded games.

The U.S.A.P.A. website offers a list of safety tips (among offerings of paddles and other official equipment for purchase). “We want to make sure that they’re staying safe, because it’s such a passionate group, and it’s so hard to not play pickleball,” she said.

For most Picklers, though, playing at home with only their fellow quarantiners is more than enough right now. “When I’m in the backyard hitting with my husband or kids, I can feel like things are somewhat normal,” Ms. Webb said. “Or, at least, have hope that they will get back there soon.”